



The Needs Analysis and Characteristics of Chinese-Speaking Adult ESL Learners

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Introduction

There were three main purposes of this study. The first one was to explore the characteristics and needs of Chinese-speaking adult ESL learners in an Auckland language school. The premise is that if the most important reason why a learner is motivated to learn English can be identified, it is possible for teachers to meet the learner's needs. The curriculum of an ESL course can, with this information, be focused on the areas where students are most conscious of their powerlessness. Gubbay (1987) stresses that though learners coming to ESL classes state that they want to learn English, it is what they hope English will give them that is the real motivation (p. 88).

The second aim was to survey their attitudes towards the content and methods of the ESL courses they attend. Attitude is a state of readiness; a tendency to act or react in a certain manner when confronted with certain stimuli. Thus, the individuals' attitudes are present but dormant most of the time and become expressed in speech or other behaviour only when the object of the attitude is perceived (Oppenheim, 1983, pp. 105-6). Knowing learners' attitude towards the teaching content and methods, it is possible for the teachers to guide and improve their classroom practice. Brown (1995) states that "to ignore the attitudes and opinions of any of the groups in a program is at best an act of arrogance and at worst an act of political suicide. Attitude questions are created to uncover information about participants' feelings and attitudes toward elements of the program" (p. 44).

Finally, this study attempted to tentatively suggest better teaching methods and learning strategies for adult learners based on the analysis of the various ESL methods.

Centered on these purposes, several research questions have been developed to focus the study and two main research instruments (questionnaire and interviews) were adopted in this research.

The Research Questions and Answers

What are the adult ESL learners' important reasons for learning English? How urgent do they feel their needs for improving English are?

Due to their current life experiences and problems, the majority of the subjects felt that their need for improving English was urgent. Living in an English-speaking country, poor language proficiency had caused various inconveniences to them and also affected their lives severely. The degree of urgency for learning English was affected by the characteristics of the learners. First, it has been found that the subjects in their thirties and forties

felt a more urgent need for better English than those in their twenties or over fifty years of age. Secondly, the learners with better educational background were more concerned over their lack of English and were more interested in learning.

There are some reasons for the subjects to study English urgently. Speaking English for everyday communication with New Zealanders was a predominant reason for attending the ESL course. Getting jobs and entering colleges and universities for further education were also important reasons for studying ESL. However the reason of coming to class for social interaction was an unimportant reason for studying English. More of the students who had lived in New Zealand for a shorter time considered getting jobs as an important reason for study. On the contrary, the students who had been in New Zealand for a longer time were less concerned with employment. In addition, learning English for further education was crucial for the majority of students in their twenties and thirties, yet it was rated as far less important by those of the other age groups.

What kind of competence in English are these learners striving for? What are the important things they need to be able to do in English?

As to the specific skills that the subjects needed to be able to perform in English, the skill of social communication was considered as the most important one for the majority of the subjects. Comprehension was rated in the second position. Comparatively, speaking, reading and writing English were believed to be less important by these learners. Although communication skills were believed to be more important than literacy skills, the results show that the ability of filling in various forms was rated the highest. In addition, the strong wish for understanding radio, TV, newspapers and magazines indicated these learners' wide interest and desire for studying advanced English.

What learning environment do these learners prefer? What classroom activities and teaching strategies do they find helpful to their learning?

The learners liked studying in a communicative environment. This was supported by the following results: they preferred to learn in small groups and by whole-class discussions than to learn individually; and they showed a strong preference for studying in a class with students of different nationalities than a class consisting of all Chinese speakers.

Compared with one of mixed-level of English, the students liked a class with students of the same English level. They believed that such an environment was more beneficial and supportive for their study and was free of anxieties.

Although the learners did not like memorization, there was a strong preference for the other formal and traditional ESL classroom activities such as copying off the board, listening and taking notes, and repeating and so on. Meanwhile, only some students liked the communicative activities such as conversation, role-play and language games.

As to the various learning resources, textbooks and written materials were found to be more helpful than audio-tapes, television and video. Moreover, using pictures, posters and other real objects in teaching was considered helpful by some students.

Pronunciation turned out to be the most popular learning content. Most of the students also liked to study grammar and reading. Being the most difficult skill to learn, there was little interest expressed in studying writing skills.

The learners were more used to studying under the teacher's careful guidance and direction than to being left with problems to be solved by themselves. Most of them preferred to let the teacher explain everything than to give them problems. Besides, they depended on the teacher to point out their mistakes. These indicate that they liked the traditional roles of teachers and learners in an ESL class, possibly due to their own earlier education experiences in their home countries.

Finally, when making mistakes, more students reported that they liked to be corrected later in private by the teacher rather than being corrected in class.

Do various characteristics of the learners such as age, educational background, and length of residence in New Zealand affect the motivation and knowledge of the Chinese-speaking adult ESL learners?

The significant findings confirmed the characteristics of adult learners and their learning principles summarized by adult educators. Like most adult learners, the Chinese-speaking learners were highly motivated to improve English and were eager to learn. With poor or inadequate English, the multiple disadvantages that had been experienced by them were only too clear; therefore out of immediate personal needs and with strong motivations, they joined the ESL classes. Their feelings, problems, and needs were of present time perspective and were related to their current life experiences.

Fears and anxieties for learning were reported by some of these adult learners. Being old and away from school for many years, they were worried about being students again. Some of them were nervous about speaking English in class and making mistakes in front of their classmates. Others were easily upset when they could not see any progress. Stress and lack of confidence were at work all the time. The fears and anxieties expressed cannot be ignored.

As most of the subjects had prior experiences of learning English before, their past learning experience proved to be both helpful and harmful to their new learning. On the one hand, some students expressed the view that the past experience was useful as a basis on which to establish the new knowledge and resources for sharing experience among learners. On the other hand, certain incorrect ways of learning and inappropriate ways of using English had been very difficult to be redressed.

What are their general impressions of the ESL courses that they are taking? What would they like more of and what would they like less of?

Most of the subjects found the course (i.e. General English Course) useful, well organized and interesting, so they quite liked the course they were attending. In addition, a few students expressed the wish for more practice in speaking and listening, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

When evaluating the English for Specific Purposes Course, most of the subjects thought the teaching content practical and useful. However, they suggested a better course with good organization, or appropriate pace of presentation catering for the needs of individual students, an easier way for the students to take notes, and a more suitable class level.

The students also suggested the use of fixed textbooks in ESL classes in order to provide a better structure. They emphasized more useful and practical lesson content. Some students stated that they needed regular revision of knowledge taught to provide some feedback.

What methods are better to use in teaching adult ESL learners in classrooms?

The subjects are found to like the traditional method for their study of basic English knowledge and skills. For example, they want to learn some grammar rules, remember items of vocabulary and so on. If they make linguistic mistakes, they would like every mistake to be corrected by the teacher. This may be caused by the habit of learning that they had in their home countries. Therefore, the teacher should use some traditional teaching skills from the grammar translation method in the classrooms, e.g., putting focus on grammatical parsing, i.e. the form and inflection of words (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

However, most of the subjects also want to develop their communication skills, especially in listening and speaking, in order to be able to communicate with Kiwi friends. To meet this need, the teacher should also use a communicative approach because the goal of teaching is to develop the ability for communication (Celce-Murcia, 1991). In addition, the teacher should also use the audio-lingual method for the listening and speaking skills.

Therefore, it is suggested that the teacher use an eclectic method, a method that collects the elements of the currently popular teaching methods mentioned in Chapter 2, that is, the grammar-translation method, the direct method, audio-lingual method, the situational method and communicative approach. All these methods are combined into one and are used appropriately to meet the students' different learning needs.

Conclusion

The main findings of this study indicate that whatever the ESL teaching approaches and methods used by the teachers, the characteristics of individual adult learners and their specific needs need to be taken into account in order to provide the best learning content, activities and environment to the learners. It is hoped that this study can contribute to the knowledge of ESL teaching to adult learners and that implications of the findings will lead to an improved program of adult ESL teaching in the language school in Auckland.

References

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